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AUTHOR Tay, Mary W. J.
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ABSTRACT

A discussion of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction begins with a review of the English language teaching situation in Singapore today and goes on to examine issues in the production of ESL instructional materials. The focus is on oral language instruction. The first section, concerning Singapore, outlines the structure of syllabuses for elementary and secondary education and considers the strengths and weaknesses of the materials used currently. The second section examines three areas in which oral language instruction in Singapore needs improvement, i.e., instruction should: (1) place additional emphasis on developing intelligibility within an international community; (2) provide practice in interaction in which there is an element of communicative stress; and (3) integrate speech with writing, reading, and listening skills. The third section presents guidelines for development of instructional materials on spoken English. They address five primary issues and related concepts: (1) who is the speaker for whom the materials are intended? (accent type, age, level of education); (2) what is the subject matter? (type of interaction, genre, and amount of required background knowledge); (3) to whom is the speaker/learner speaking? (accent, peer group/superior, proficiency level); (4) where is the speaker? (geographic location, acoustics, room size); and (5) what is the purpose of the communication? (giving instructions, giving information, conveying attitude or feeling). (MSE)

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Teaching Spoken English in the Non-Native Context: Considerations for the Materials Writer

Mary W.J. Tay

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TEACHING SPOKEN ENGLISH IN THE NON-NATIVE CONTEXT: CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE MATERIALS WRITER

Mary W J Tay

1 INTRODUCTION

The starting point of this paper is the conviction that in the arduous task of producing suitable instructional materials for language learning, the materials developer, the syllabus designer, the teacher-trainer and the language specialist all have a role to play. Of course it is on the materials developer that the greatest responsibility falls but insights from others involved in the process of language teaching and learning should lead to an awareness of some of the broader issues to be kept in mind in the production of materials.

It is primarily from the viewpoint of the language specialist that this paper is written. There are three main sections in the paper. The first section attempts a quick review of the current situation in Singapore with regard to the teaching of Spoken English. The aims and rationale for teaching Spoken English will be examined with reference to (a) the English Syllabus (both Primary and Secondary levels) for the New Education System, (b) a selection of the main English language textbooks currently used in the secondary schools and (c) other English language-related publications such as TELL, published by the English Unit, Curriculum Branch, Schools Division of the Ministry of Education. While the review will highlight some of the strengths of the current syllabus and textbooks, it will also identify gaps in the teaching of Spoken English. The second section of the paper will go on to argue for the consideration of three broader issues in the production of materials for Spoken English, ie **intelligibility, interaction**, and **integration**. The third and final section will evolve a set of guidelines for instructional materials on spoken English.

2 REVIEW OF THE TEACHING OF SPOKEN ENGLISH IN SINGAPORE TODAY

Although Spoken English is not taught as such, the importance of Oral English is given due recognition in the English syllabus for the New Education System at both primary (henceforth PES) and secondary levels (henceforth

SES). In the statement of the general aims of teaching English Language in the primary school, the four basic skills are listed, with listening and speaking preceding reading and writing. The priority of the oral approach is also emphasized: 'Pupils must have a good oral mastery of the language items before they proceed to apply them in reading and writing' (PES:2) and the integration of reading and writing with oral English is advocated (PES:3).

In the syllabus published by the Ministry of Education, it is noteworthy that at the primary level, the objectives for listening are listed separately from speaking but at the secondary level the aural/oral skills are grouped together. Recently, the English Unit of the Ministry of Education has produced a separate forty-page document detailing listening comprehension guidelines for secondary school (normal, express and special courses). This is a vast improvement on the earlier secondary school English syllabus in that it incorporates the three I's that I shall be talking about in section two of my paper. There is provision for interaction-based activities, integration with the other major language skills, ie speaking, reading and writing, and concern for intelligibility as reflected in the recommended use of authentic materials. However, as these guidelines are still very new, mention must be made of the earlier syllabus which, presumably, helped to shape many of the current textbooks on English.

The listening skills to be taught at the primary level are mainly the ability to follow oral instructions and the ability to comprehend a short talk on subjects of general interest. At the lower primary levels, the first listening skill to be taught is the ability to recognise and discriminate the letter names and sounds of English. The speaking skills to be taught at the primary level, quite understandably, appear to be influenced by the requirements of the Oral English component of the English paper in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). The ability to read aloud passages of about one hundred words with correct pronunciation, proper phrasing, stress and intonation, is listed first, followed by the ability to respond to questions in correct English, and the ability to state facts, give simple explanations and express opinions on common everyday matters as well as things of special interest to pupils.

At the secondary level, the aural/oral skills are stated as follows: the ability to understand English spoken in class and in everyday situations the pupil is likely to experience, the ability to speak so that he is easily understood by people he is likely to encounter, the ability to understand and use orally the more common speech conventions of social English, the ability to carry out a conversation on a topic appropriate to his maturity and interests, and the ability to read aloud with an acceptable degree of fluency and accuracy.

The main weaknesses in the primary syllabus may be said to be: the lack of integration between the four skills, the treatment of listening as something purely passive rather than interactional, and the preoccupation with correctness in speaking. If listening and speaking skills are to be of any use for the learner of

English, there must be greater emphasis on fluency and intelligibility. After all, is it not the case that only examiners and teachers of English listen to speech in order to judge 'correctness of language'? The vast majority of users of English listen and speak in order to communicate ideas, attitudes and feelings and not to speak correct English. Of course correctness is important firstly because below a certain 'threshold' level, speech which is marred by too many incorrect forms, becomes quite unintelligible, and secondly, because of the premium put on correctness by our society in terms of prestige and social acceptability.

The aural/oral skills listed in the secondary school syllabus reflect a greater awareness of considerations beyond correctness. The merging of aural with oral skills is itself an improvement in the sense that except in monologues, nobody can communicate effectively without being a good listener. On the other hand, nobody listens without interacting verbally or non-verbally in some way. Another strength of the secondary school syllabus is the pragmatism reflected in such expressions as 'situations the pupil is likely to encounter', 'easily understood by people he is likely to encounter', 'a topic appropriate to his maturity and interests'.

Any review of the teaching of Spoken English in Singapore schools today cannot stop at a critique of the syllabus but must also survey the main English language textbooks currently used in the schools. Constraints of space and time will allow only a cursory review of one set of materials - CLUE, the acronym for COURSE IN LEARNING AND USING ENGLISH, a series of Secondary English Course teaching materials produced by the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS). However, it is hoped that by highlighting the present strengths and weaknesses in the materials used for the teaching of Oral English in the secondary schools, the relevance of the issues discussed in the next section of my paper will become clearer.

The main strengths of the CLUE materials may be said to be:

1. It is a multi-media course which makes good use of cassette tapes and video cassette tapes, picture cue cards and letter cards.
2. It aims to integrate the four skills of listening speaking, reading and writing in language learning (although the integration of listening and speaking with the other skills is not too successful).
3. Language is taught as a means of communication in meaningful contexts and pupils are given training and practice in a wide range of communicative language skills.
4. It attempts to use authentic materials.
5. It attempts to teach English as language across the curriculum, thereby recognising the need to develop in the pupils the ability to use English in the other subjects in the school curriculum.

In spite of these considerable strengths, however, a number of noticeable weaknesses in the materials used for the teaching of spoken English must be mentioned:

1. Pronunciation is taught separately from everything else in each unit. (This is true of the Secondary 1 and 2 materials only: in Secondary 3 and 4, there is no separate section on pronunciation). It appears first in each unit but there is very little integration with the other skills of reading and writing.
2. There is too much concern with correctness in pronunciation compared to the equally important (if not more important) considerations of intelligibility and overall fluency.
3. The only visible gradation in the materials is the length of the words and sentences used. This could create the impression that there is little sense of progression. The same items are covered from Secondary 1 to Secondary 4: vowels, diphthongs, consonants and consonant clusters, stress and intonation.
4. The priority given to the items of pronunciation does not reflect their relative importance for considerations of intelligibility. It has been suggested (Nihalani, 1983, 1988; Tay, 1986) that suprasegmental features such as intonation, sentence stress and word stress play a far more important part than segmentals such as consonants, vowels and diphthongs. However, the suprasegmental features are covered only in sixteen out of forty units. There are only four units on the very important area of intonation, and the exercises on stress are not extensive enough to make an impact on the student.
5. The way that pronunciation is presented in the materials could do with considerable improvement. Most of the pronunciation drills take the form of isolated words and sentences taken out of context. Hardly anything is done to systemically teach discourse, or anything above the sentence level. It is true that there is much scope for oral production but everything seems to be left to the classroom teacher who, given the current emphasis on success in examinations, is likely to be listening to the student's oral production only for correctness.

Before moving on to consider broader issues in the production of materials for spoken English, brief mention must be made of English-language related publications such as TELL, an acronym for Teaching of English Language and Literature. In the January 1987 issue (vol 3 no. 1), there is an excellent section on developing oral competence by Andrew Watts, which I would highly recommend to the language teacher because of the many practical ideas contained in it. Two very important factors: integration with all EL instruction, and engaging the pupils actively in meaningful language interaction are mentioned in the editorial.

3 ISSUES IN THE PRODUCTION OF MATERIALS FOR SPOKEN ENGLISH

The gaps found in the teaching of Spoken English may be said to be the three I's: intelligibility, interaction, and integration.

One of the arguments often used to justify teaching RP to Singaporean speakers of English is that of INTELLIGIBILITY. It is often assumed that unless Singaporeans speak RP, they cannot be understood. This is an assumption which has never been backed up by empirical research. On the contrary, it has been established (Tay, 1986) that the assumption is invalid. One hundred British listeners living in the London area and who had never been to Singapore were asked to listen to a short stretch of spontaneous speech by ten Singaporean speakers and to rate their intelligibility. The speakers were all second year undergraduates reading English Language at the National University of Singapore. Of the ten speakers, the highest score was 89.1% and the lowest 56.4%. Five speakers scored more than 80% and two more than 70%. The speaker who scored highest certainly did not speak RP, but was educated in Singapore and had never been out of Singapore.

For our present purposes, perhaps the most important finding from the project is that contrary to popular belief, 'incorrect' pronunciation and grammar did not seriously impair intelligibility. Of course there were instances of when the listeners heard 'filial' as 'feel ill', 'pork ribs' as 'pot ribs', 'bangle' as 'banger' and 'accept' as 'a set' because that was what the speakers sounded like to the listeners. But there were not many instances of these. What is perhaps even more surprising is that the use of the 'wrong' tense did not bother the listeners at all. Thus, there were cases where the speaker said 'return', and 'retain' instead of 'returned' and 'retained' but all the listeners heard them as 'returned' and 'retained' anyway.

If 'incorrect' pronunciation and grammar do not seriously impair intelligibility, what does? The major obstacles identified in the project were: (1) discourse strategies, (2) vocabulary items, and (3) the mixing of styles and registers. As examples of (1), take the particles ah (used as a topic marker) and know and see (used as rapport markers). None of the British listeners ever heard these even after their presence was pointed out to them but all the Singaporean listeners did. As examples of (2), there were unfamiliar lexical items or collocations such as 'joss sticks', 'filial piety' and 'snap' photographs. As an example of (3) there was the use of a very colloquial word 'hubby' instead of 'husband' alongside a very formal one ('deceased' for 'dead') in an otherwise semi-formal context. These were what presented problems of intelligibility to the British but not the Singaporean listeners. If one of our aims in teaching spoken English to a certain

group of students is to help them speak intelligibly on an international scale then these areas should be considered by materials developers of Spoken English.

The second major issue in the production of materials for Spoken English is INTERACTION. By interaction is meant the communication that takes place between the various participants in a discourse: how they express themselves, react (verbally and non-verbally) to what has been said, contradict or support the views of the other participants, express their feelings or attitudes to whatever is said and so on. This is a much neglected aspect of the teaching of Spoken English, perhaps because the oral English examination at the end of Secondary 4 stresses largely non-interactive activities such as reading aloud, answering questions on a passage using complete sentences, and taking part in an informal conversation in which the speaker controls most of the subject matter and the turn-taking procedures. These activities may well 'equip' a student to use English orally but they certainly do not 'enable' him to be an effective, interesting, dynamic speaker in most speaking situations which are unstructured and unpredictable.

In general, it may be said that the current syllabuses and textbooks do provide students with opportunity to practise what has been aptly described as 'interactional short turns'. (Brown and Yule, 1983: 28). However, students are taught to function only in situations with little 'communicative stress' (Brown and Yule, 1983: 28) where typically, they take part in conversation simply by responding to questions that somebody also asks them or reacting to somesone else's topic. Such aims are not broad enough to produce an effective speaker.

In addition to teaching 'interactional short turns', students should be taught how to handle 'longer transactional turns'. A good speaker is not just one who can respond to what was said in correct pronunciation and grammar and in complete sentences. He or she must be able to interact with other speakers by either building upon what was said previously, demolishing it, or sidetracking it in order to introduce a new topic. Preparing short informal talks on certain topics and answering questions from the rest of the class (SES:44) does go some way towards helping students handle larger 'chunks' of speech above the level of the sentence. But unfortunately it provides no practice for unprepared, unstructured, unpredictable interactions. As most speech in the real world have these characteristics, the importance of preparing students to handle 'communicative stress' (no script, no prior preparation, no previous coaching in any form) cannot be over-emphasized. Role play, debates, or brainstorming sessions on a topic given on the spot should all help towards developing the type of oral fluency described above.

It is, of course, much easier for the teacher to stay within the safe confines of 'correct' pronunciation and grammar and merely correct mispronunciations and mistakes in grammar but if the task of the teacher of spoken English is to help the student communicate, then it can only be done by giving the students prac-

tice in communicating under 'communicative stress'. This is probably best done by taping (either on audio-tape or video-tape) peer-group interaction within the classroom, analysing them for problems in communication, and then discussing strategies with the students. This means moving away from the large-class, teacher-dominated method where the materials, or the teacher, constantly take the initiative and the student is simply required to respond. It also means that the teacher must refrain from interrupting the conversation to correct mistakes in pronunciation or grammar, or even to ask the student to clarify a point. After all, if the aim is to develop fluency in 'self expression' in the spoken language, there is nothing more disconcerting than being constantly corrected or to be told that what has been said is not clear when the real listeners, the peer group in this case, understand what was said perfectly well.

The third and last issue that I wish to discuss is that of INTEGRATION. It is now generally acknowledged that spoken language is different from written language (Halliday, 1985), that students should be taught to talk, not like books, in complete written-language sentences, but spontaneously in short, phrase-sized chunks (Brown and Yule, 1983). These new areas of awareness have tended to detract somewhat from the importance of integrating spoken English with the rest of the English curriculum and the rest of the school curriculum. It is this integration that I now wish to discuss.

The present syllabus and textbooks do recognise the importance of integrating speech with writing. Integration is thought of mainly in terms of sequential order-ing, such as discussing ideas for a composition orally before putting them down in writing. This is of course important. But equally important is integration in the sense that what is learnt in spoken English must affect written English. One of the current problems in the teaching of pronunciation is that most of the exercises are artificial, consisting of isolated words or sentences. If an integrated approach is kept in mind, the teaching of larger units of speech such as rhythm, sentence stress and intonation would be given top priority instead of individual consonants, vowels and diphthongs. Intonation can be related to grammar. For example, the contrast between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses can be taught not only in terms of the written language as indicated by commas, but also in terms of the spoken language as indicated by tone groups. Examples of such sentences are:

My brother, who is a doctor, has gone to Edinburgh.

Speech should also be integrated with writing because it is well established that 'errors' in speech can be related to 'errors' in writing. Thus, the omission of 's' at the end of an English word is much more serious than, for example, the confusion between 'tanks' and 'thanks' in pronunciation. While the latter is made clear from the context and does not lead to misspellings, the former,

because of its high functional load, often leads to serious errors in writing as well. For example, when attached to a noun, it could make the noun plural (task vs tasks) and plurality in turn determines the choice of the verb in a sentence (make vs makes). It could also make a noun a possessive (John vs John's). Attached to a noun or pronoun, it could indicate that it is short for is as in 'He's coming' or has as in 'He's gone home. Attached to a verb, it indicates that the doer of the action is the third person singular. If correctness is important in speech, it is this type of correctness, the type which affects the written form, that should be given priority in teaching.

Translating these broader issues of intelligibility, interaction and integration into guidelines for the materials developer is not an easy task, but in the last section of my paper I shall try to do this.

4 GUIDELINES FOR THE WRITING OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS ON SPOKEN ENGLISH

One way of helping the materials developer to focus on communication rather than correctness is to try and answer the well-known sociolinguistic question: WHO speaks WHAT to WHOM, WHERE and WHY? Under each question, a number of points are discussed. These are not meant to be exhaustive but are intended merely as ideas to stimulate further thought and discussion about instructional materials for spoken English.

(a) Who is the Speaker?

(i) Type of accent: the model of pronunciation for the speaker should be one that is intelligible to the people he will be interacting with; at the same time, it should enable him to identify himself with them culturally. Both these considerations would argue for a model based on educated Singaporean English rather than RP, for example.

(ii) Age: a very young child needs only to be intelligible to his parents and teachers but older people need to be intelligible to a much wider range of listeners. The content of what the speaker is saying as evident by the vocabulary and discourse patterns used should also reflect the degree and type of maturity suitable to his age.

(iii) Level of education: in both the substance and expression of his speech, a speaker should reflect the level of education he is at. Thus, a secondary three student should not sound like a primary three student in the way he expresses himself, even if he is only what is known as an 'EL2 student'.

(b) What is the Subject Matter?

(i) Type of interaction: short conversations require only short interactive turns but longer stretches of discourse, eg telling a story or presenting an argument require longer transactional turns which the student should be adequately prepared for. The student cannot 'express himself' adequately if he is not given enough practice and if he is not given sufficient guidance from the teacher about what constitutes good interaction.

(ii) Genre: specialist lectures will be intelligible only to those with an adequate grasp of the subject matter. Hence, the importance of having specialists vet instructional materials in subject areas that the language teacher is not familiar with. Hence also the importance of familiarising students with the crucial terminology needed to follow the lectures.

(iii) Amount of background knowledge which is assumed to be shared or inferrable: this will determine whether what is said is intelligible. For example, conversations which require a background knowledge of specifically British characteristics such as trains with corridors are poor tests for Singaporean speakers of English unless these speakers intend to live in England for an extended period of time.

(c) To Whom is the Speaker Speaking?

(i) Type of accent: In general, if the speaker and listener have similar accents, intelligibility is increased. One of the aims of materials for spoken English should be to train students to vary their accent according to who the audience is. Good speakers invariably do it, perhaps subconsciously.

(ii) Peer group or superior: the problem with teacher-centred interaction is that it forms only part of the child's real-world experience. Another disadvantage is that when the teacher dominates or even merely guides the discussion, the student has little chance to take the initiative. This is true also of peer group interaction where one student is much better than the other. While a student should know how to interact with their elders and betters, they should also be taught the rules of peer group interaction such as rules of politeness, turn-taking and so on.

(iii) Level of proficiency: often speakers are taught to speak so slowly and clearly that naturalness is lost. There is a type of English, popular with teachers, especially those who teach beginners, that some people feel is suitable only for the foreigner, the stupid and the deaf. To treat all listeners as one of these is highly offensive and great pains need to be taken to develop in the students the type of speech which will be pleasant, easy to understand, but not condescending in attitude.

(d) Where is the Speaker?

(i) Place: a good speaker knows how to adapt his speech according to where he is speaking. One of the problems with all the subjects of my intelligibility project was that even though they were told that they were recording for British listeners, they made no attempt to gloss unfamiliar lexical items like 'filial piety', or acronyms like 'CHIJ' and 'NUS'. Students should be made aware of what aspects of their speech, especially vocabulary and discourse, present difficulties to non-Singaporeans and to gloss these in their interaction.

(ii) Acoustics of the place: the need to train students to be able to interact well under less-than-ideal acoustic conditions is very important. Being able to communicate on a very poor telephone line, knowing how to project one's voice when addressing a noisy crowd are all part of the necessary training which the teacher should provide the student with. Those who can understand English only when spoken very slowly, clearly, and in perfect acoustic conditions will be quite unable to cope with interaction in the real world.

(iii) Size of the room: voice training, an essential component of training in Spoken English, should also teach the students how to control their voice according to whether they are in a small or a large room. How often have we met people whose pronunciation cannot be faulted but who 'lose' their audience, for example, by talking to two people in a small room as if there were 500 people in a big room (and hence sound offensive because they seem to be shouting at them) and addressing a large crowd as if they were whispering the most closely guarded secrets.

(e) What is the Purpose of What the Speaker is Saying?

Constant practice and drilling with speech that serves no purpose except to pass examinations will ensure a good grade in the exams but will not prepare students to communicate in English in the real world. Some of the most common purposes of speech are listed below:

(i) To give instructions: these should be clear and are best supplemented by visual means, such as maps, charts and diagrams. Trying to give instructions only aurally is unrealistic, especially when they are complex, such as complex road directions. Even a shopping list is probably best used when written down.

(ii) To inform: this would vary, depending on whether the listener is expected to grasp just the main idea, or also to pay attention to specific details. Again, like in (a) above, a multi-media is best.

(iii) To convey a certain attitude or feeling: the purpose of quite a lot of oral communication is not so much to convey information, as in (a) and (b)

above, but to convey a certain attitude or feeling about a topic. Students badly need training in expressing their opinions clearly without sounding opinionated, to disagree without sounding disagreeable, and to show disapproval with out being unpleasant. This much neglected area in oral communication is best taught when students are shown how differences in intonation can convey different attitudes. Non-linguistic features such as gestures and facial expressions also help in conveying attitudes.

5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I should just like to stress three points which I have touched on in this paper. First, materials designed for teaching Spoken English must be set within a much broader framework than that of pronunciation. This is because pronunciation hampers intelligibility far less than discourse strategies and registers. Second, there is the need to provide students with ample opportunities to interact freely and with initiative, instead of being asked only to respond to teachers' questions. Third, the materials used to teach Spoken English should be well integrated with other skills of listening, reading and writing.

I am aware that many of the issues I have discussed in this paper are concerns already shared by many of my colleagues working closely with the schools. For example, REAP and ACT show great promise in producing a new generation of students who will be able to 'communicate' in English meaningfully. If I have raised more questions than provided answers it is only because I feel it would be presumptuous of me, a language specialist, to tell teacher trainers, teachers, syllabus designers and materials developers exactly what to do. I hope, however, that I have provided a forum for fruitful discussion.